

Why we are sponsoring this debate

Statement by Peter Erskine, Chairman & CEO, O2

O2 believes that, in order to behave responsibly as a business, we're not going far wrong if we act and run the business in the way that you like to live your life. One can no longer build a brand just by running nice advertising; you've got to live the story as well. At O2 acting responsibly in all that we do - towards our employees, customers, suppliers and within those communities we serve - is critical. We measure what we do and strive for continuous improvement.

Dialogue with our stakeholders - understanding your views - is key to our success. It's about asking the right questions. It's also important what kind of employer we are. In the last year, our Irish business was voted 'the best employer' in Ireland; our UK business is 26th best, and our business is in the top ten in Germany.

Canvassing opinion from the public and our employees, and sponsoring debates such as this one, helps us to form a view of the issues that surround the mobile phone: to identify what the facts and fears are, who is responsible and for what.

We are all aware that the mobile phone is now one of the most important items people own. They conduct a lot of their life on it, and once you accept how essential the mobile phone is to individuals and businesses, you also realise the associated risks and dangers, and the need for vigilance. We want to provide our customers with the services they demand and help them to access the mobile entertainment and information services they want - and we respect their freedom to do so.

But we are also committed to protecting the vulnerable, especially children, and are developing capabilities in all our markets to support this. We aim to give teachers, parents and carers the tools and knowledge they need to oversee the safety of young people. Many parents want their children to carry a mobile phone for their safety and security. Young people see the mobile phone as a way of life and an important way to stay in touch with friends. Research shows that parents agree by three to one that the overall advantage of a child using a mobile phone outweighs the disadvantages. Our dialogue also revealed that children's charities welcome inbuilt content controls for children using mobile services.

The fact that kids can be bullied via, or for, their phone; the whole debate about the alleged health effects of mobile phones and the ability to access inappropriate content are all areas we take seriously. It's our job to look at the research and ensure we are doing everything we can to educate people.

Child protection is naturally one of our priority areas, which explains why - in line with other operators - we adhere to voluntary codes of conduct that aim to protect children from malicious content. We need to safeguard children from the potential dangers of a range of content and services available on a mobile phone. O2 in the UK and Germany operate online public forums or 'chat rooms' which are moderated by trained employees in order to identify inappropriate, threatening or bullying exchanges with children. We undertake to alert relevant agencies to any complaints and we work closely with the police when appropriate.

Children and their mobile spending can be another concern for parents. We try to encourage responsible use of mobile phones through several initiatives: In the UK, O2 has partnered with the Personal Finance Education Group (pfe) to help school children understand costs and to use their mobile phones responsibly. We have also sponsored Childnet International to produce a 'checklist for parents' to help them understand how they can protect their children from abusing others or receiving abuse via their mobile phone. In Germany, we help teach young people to manage their mobile spending, working with schools through an interactive learning programme called 'Mobile phone course with Polly and Fred'. Our nuisance call bureau has visited hundreds of schools in the last year to provide advice to children on the safe use of mobile phones.

Despite the fact that we do not market phones to under 16 year olds, the reality is that 91% of children have a mobile by the time they are 12 years old. This forces us to live in the real world and to review and update our own policies and procedures to ensure they are fit for purpose. It's all about investing in the necessary safeguards and about effective communication with our customers. When parents buy mobile handsets for their children, we encourage them to monitor usage carefully. We promote awareness by raising the issues in our industry and by engaging with charities, child safety campaigners, governments, law enforcement agencies, regulators, content producers and parental groups. Information and guidance are available within this debate as well as in our stores and on our website.

In the UK and Ireland, our leaflets include:

- What your child's mobile phone can do
- Bullying on mobile phones
- Sensible use of camera phones
- Safe use of mobile chat rooms
- Helping children deal with nuisance calls

This online debate delves deeper into child protection issues. We ran the first child protection debate in 2005, where we learnt a lot of different views. Even since then, issues have risen and our responsibility as a business has grown.

At the end of the debate there will be a summary event and a full report.

Thank you for contributing.